



U.S. Immigration
and Customs
Enforcement

News Release

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Leaders of sham marriage ring plead to charges stemming from ICE-led probe *“Operation Pit Boss” uncovered marriage fraud scheme that recruited at casinos*

TACOMA, Wash. — The leaders of a major sham marriage scheme based in southwest Washington pleaded guilty yesterday in federal court in Tacoma to visa fraud and money laundering charges stemming from a multi-agency investigation headed by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

Brothers Phuoc Huu Nguyen (a.k.a Steve Nguyen), 42, and Loc Huu Nguyen, 38, both of Vancouver, Washington, entered their guilty pleas four days before their trial was scheduled to begin. An additional defendant in the case, Everett Ledbetter, 34, of Lynnwood, Washington, pleaded guilty this morning in Tacoma to conspiracy to commit visa fraud.

According to court documents, in 2003, agents from ICE and the Department of State’s Diplomatic Security Service uncovered a network of individuals who were arranging sham marriages to bring Vietnamese immigrants into the United States illegally. The conspirators, led by Loc and Phuoc Nguyen, recruited U.S. citizens to travel to Vietnam to enter into fictitious engagements with Vietnamese nationals to facilitate their unlawful entry into the United States. The investigation was dubbed “Operation Pit Boss” because several of the conspirators worked at casinos in the Vancouver, Washington area.

“Visa fraud undermines the integrity of our nation’s legal immigration system,” said Leigh Winchell, special agent in charge for ICE investigations in Seattle. “This case should send a clear message that ICE is working aggressively to ensure that this kind of criminal activity does not go unchecked or unpunished.”

Recruits received \$500 and \$1,500, in addition to the free trip to Vietnam. Vietnamese nationals were charged between \$10,000 and \$20,000 by the defendants for a non-immigrant visa authorizing their entry into the U.S. The conspirators manufactured letters of affection and staged photos of the recruits with the Vietnamese nationals to perpetuate the fraud. Participants also transported U.S. currency from the United States to Vietnam to promote the visa fraud conspiracy, which constituted a violation of the federal money laundering statute.

Some recruits who refused to participate after traveling to Vietnam were threatened or intimidated by members of the conspiracy. Investigators identified more than 130 U.S. citizens who were involved in the scheme. At one point during the investigation, all requests for fiancé visas for Vietnamese nationals were suspended until authorities could identify and arrest the participants in this conspiracy. The Vietnamese nationals who entered the United States illegally will be processed for removal.

Five other defendants in the case have also entered guilty pleas. They include Than Bui, 54, of Lakewood, Washington; Richard Earl Anderson, 36, of Seattle; and Ryan Scott Daniels, 28, of Tacoma, all of whom pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit visa fraud. Last month, Monica Nguyen (a.k.a. Dao Thi Nguyen), 30, of Lynnwood, Washington, and Amanda Thao Nguyen, 28, of Lynnwood, Washington pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit visa fraud and conspiracy to engage in money laundering. Monica and Amanda Nguyen are siblings of Phuoc and Loc Nguyen.

The United States Attorney's office is continuing the investigation, and anticipates seeking additional indictments.

Conspiracy to commit visa fraud carries a penalty of up to five years in prison and a fine of up to \$250,000. Conspiracy to commit money laundering carries a penalty of up to 20 years in prison, and a fine of up to \$250,000 or twice the amount of the laundered funds.

In addition to ICE and the Diplomatic Security Service, the Washington State Gambling Commission and the Criminal Investigation Division of the Internal Revenue Service also participated in the investigation.

This scheme is similar to one dismantled last year by ICE agents in Southern California that resulted in the indictment of more than 40 individuals. Like the Washington case, many of those involved in the Asian marriage fraud ring in Southern California were recruited at casinos. According to investigators, the suspects in the California case also went to elaborate lengths to make the sham marriages appear legitimate, posing for wedding pictures, fabricating love letters, even creating fraudulent joint tax returns.

ICE

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement was established in March 2003 as the largest investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security. ICE is comprised of four integrated divisions that form a 21st century law enforcement agency with broad responsibilities for a number of key homeland security priorities.